

"HELLO! MY NAME IS ABDUL. HOW ARE YOU?"

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Among the more distal branches of the family tree of folklore studies we find the study of greetings. To the extent that they are folklore we find that they are socially agreed upon verbal and gestural or behavioral elements involved in the meetings of individuals. Like all folklore, greetings are learned, mostly through "an informal system for learning the daily logic and worldview of the people around us" (Toelken 1979:27).

Anyone learning a foreign language must willy-nilly learn something of the folklore of the culture that uses it. If greetings are a minor genre, they are still an important one for somebody trying to get along in a strange land. It is therefore interesting to look at a group of people who find themselves in a situation where greetings are called for, but who are learning a language and therefore a culture. A good example of such a group is the foreign students at a major university. A good example of such a situation is the frequent meetings at or in elevators in a student apartment building.

Such people quickly find, or perhaps assume, that the textbook, "Hello. My name is Abdul. How are you?" style of greeting is not appropriate in meeting many strangers during a fifteen-second elevator ride before morning classes.

At the time of writing I was living in Campus View House, which is a part of "married student housing" at Indiana University. Contrary to the image of a chalet on a hillside which is implied in the name, it is a sprawling, nine-story apartment building, built down a hole. It is populated largely by foreign graduate students and their families.

There is a center block where the three wings of the building meet and it is there that two elevators are found through which nearly all of the residents pass daily. In the best of all possible worlds such a place would be

a focus of social interaction where people would meet, chat, and make friends while waiting for the elevator. This is not the best of all possible worlds. Meetings in and around elevators in Campus View are like those on city street corners. People happen to be together for a few moments and are concerned with their individual activities, rather than with social interaction. This may be true of any similar apartment building, but the factor that is critically different here is that of language. All graduate students can read well and write acceptably in English. Most can speak fairly well, but many of the wives seem to speak little or no English.

There are a few problems in observing the interactions of the people in elevators as a folklorist. In the first place, the space is so small that it is impossible to be anything but a participant observer and when the group being observed is small and variable, it is difficult to filter out the effect of the observer on the other participants. The ideal way to study such interaction would be to find an elevator with a security camera that could be monitored without being in the elevator. This would entail no invasion of privacy since such surveillance is accepted as necessary or desirable. In addition, since greetings are speech acts, or gestures (which are assumed to function like speech) which are known to be variable with language and culture, it is difficult to translate all of what is said in and around the elevators. The diversity of language, verbal or nonverbal, is very great.

Some observations should be stated as a caveat before presenting a few examples. People engaged in continuing conversations will keep them going as they pass through the elevators without making any attempt to include others whom they chance to meet, particularly if they think the others do not understand the language. The effect of this is that English conversation tends to sag, since most of those at Campus View understand English. Conversations in Chinese or Arabic or other languages tend to continue in an animated fashion. Furthermore, the greetings among those sharing a common nationality seem to be more warm and enthusiastic, an effect of camaraderie in a strange land.

1. A man enters a crowded elevator. His eyes meet those of a woman standing at the button panel. He nods and smiles, she offers no response. As the door closes he faces the door and says, "One, please." The woman pushes one. Everyone gazes at the numbers (counting down) over the door.

This greeting is a good example of a common minimum response. The meeting of eyes demands some response, but the nod does not require a response. Even though the elevator is crowded, personal space is still recognized to the extent that one does not reach across another person, particularly a woman, to press buttons on the panel. The request that the first floor button be pressed is made, but not addressed to anyone in particular. The request is responded to by pressing the button even though it has already been pressed. Most people get off at floor one. It may be observed that people will almost always press the button of the floor they want even though they have seen others press it already.

2. A man enters an elevator in which there is one woman. He is carrying a baby. He presses the button for his floor as the woman moves to the far corner. After a few moments she says, "Oh, isn't he cute? How old is he?" The man replies that the baby is two months old and a brief conversation follows.

It seems that in the absence of a greeting, something is required as an opener for conversation. Babies are wonderful for this purpose but such things as grocery bags, mail and trash can also serve. In many cases, people will speak directly to the baby (or dog) without saying a word to the parent (or owner). Personal space is often maintained by moving around in the car. Some people will do fairly elaborate dances around the car as people come in and get out, even though their movement is not strictly required to admit them or to allow them out.

3. A man steps into a crowded elevator which there is still room near the door.

Although there is still room for him all the people move away a little until the door closes. When it is shut the people move a little back toward the door leaving the newcomer less room than there was at first.

Although nobody speaks, the presence of the new person is acknowledged by the crowd. As he becomes one of the crowd, he loses his particular standing and, unless he is regarded with some suspicion, his extra space.

4. A small group is in an elevator when the doors open and two young men of Hispanic appearance enter carrying on a conversation in Spanish. The athletic looking men both carry hunting knives on their belts. They are not greeted or acknowledged in any way. They carry on an animated conversation in Spanish. They go up two floors and get off. When they are gone the others exchange glances, looks of surprise. An American woman says to a man, "Cubans!"

The two men with knives are perceived as strangers or outsiders. They create a minor sensation in that they are seen as a threat which is out of place and undesirable. Their behavior is consistent with Campus View norms in that they are a group self-isolated in their own language. The behavior of the others in the car differs from the norm in that they specifically avoid the strangers rather than simply declining to interact with them. The woman's reaction reflects a growing stereotype applied as an explanation of the unusual incident.

5. A man is on an elevator when the doors open and a woman comes in. He recognizes her and says, "Howdy." She replies in a thick accent, "I am fine."

This is clearly an example of a textbook reply. 'Howdy' may derive from "How do you do?" but it does not invite a reply. It is a verbal

formula with certain associations of region, class, and formality, not a question.

6. An American is on the elevator. Two Japanese enter. One of them smiles warmly and makes an utterance which sounds a little like 'Hello.' The American says hello and nods. They in turn tentatively offer a half bow. The American returns the bow with a chuckle. Everyone smiles. The car arrives and the door opens and all begin insisting that the others go first.

Here we have an attempt at accommodating to cultural differences. Japanese seem always to lurch forward slightly when making greetings and partings as if checking a habitual action. The American has, of course, read that the Japanese bow a lot and conforms somewhat to those expectations. Although everyone is ill at ease, all seem to appreciate the others' efforts and everyone is happy.

7. A woman and a baby are on an elevator which stops at a floor on the way down. The door opens to reveal a man with a lot of things on carts and stacked on the floor. He hesitates and then asks if she would mind walking the rest of the way. She does not respond promptly and he suddenly says that it is OK, and he will get another car.

This meeting with a stranger involves a breach of propriety in that it involves a request that is reasonable, but not allowed. There is no reason why the woman could not use the stairs so that the man could get on with his work, but elevator riding involves territorial rights, including those of first-come-first-served. Certain rights are built mechanically into the system, such as that of stopping a passing car even if others in it are in a hurry.

8. An American gets on an elevator and says to the African inside, "Good heavens! It's clean in here!" The African smiles and says, "Not for long." There is no further conversation.

Commentary on the conditions of the building, particularly cleanliness and, in the last year, the stench of the caulking and new suspended ceilings are acceptable substitutes for greetings. The building is one of the few things all residents have in common.

9. A man is on the elevator. The door opens and another man steps in. The second man raises his eyebrows and gives a wave of the hand with the fingers partly raised and the palm toward the head. The hand wave moves in a semicircle from near the ear up and forward. He says, "Hello! How is your wife?" His tone is enthusiastic and sincere. The first man smiles and says, "How are you?" The second responds, "I have been meaning to come and see you, but..."

Two things are of interest here. The first is the enthusiasm of the second man who is unusual in his insistence on such pleasantries. His behavior is a conscious choice, apparently related to religion. He is studying to return to Africa as an administrator of a Christian school. The second is the content of the words. The wives are more familiar with each other than the men, but it is not clear if the immediate reference to the wife is an artifact of that relationship or of a cultural standard. The second man does not respond to the cue, but diverts the conversation to those present. The reference to visiting is a formula. Neither really expects such a visit to take place, but the suggestion has been made repeatedly. Visiting has become a vacant subject of polite conversation.

Conclusions

1. There seem to be certain ritual elements in greeting in elevators.
2. Verbalization plays a small role because of the problems of language.
3. Persons are recognized and acknowledged principally through the use of space, public and personal. The public space is small and its use is conditioned by the location of doors and the button panel. Personal space is allotted new individuals to varying extents for practical reasons.
4. Eye contact is responded to in minimal verbal ways or avoided through a formalized focus of interest, the lighted numbers over the doors.
5. Babies and other things are used as opportunities for beginning conversation on superficial levels.

6. National and language groups seem to indulge in more intimate and animated interaction, particularly under cover of the privacy of a foreign language.

Discussion

From these examples it seems that there are several forces shaping the greetings of elevators. The principal one is the utilitarian nature of the encounter. People often meet in elevators because there are few elevators available, and there are a lot of people who use them. The shortness of the encounter effectively negates the closeness of the environment. The large number of people (at least eight hundred in the whole building) and the transient nature of the population mean that acquaintance with everyone is not required; therefore, there is no strong need to become friendly.

On the other hand, meeting in close quarters, particularly where there is eye contact, demands some form of greeting. A lot of people are nervous about strangers and being closed up with one can be tense. When two people are waiting for an elevator and two elevators arrive they will always take them separately, even if going to the same floor. Women will sometimes decline to get on with another person, even if they will have to wait for the next car.

These tensions could be relieved by ritual displays of friendliness or good will, but these are not available. In part this has to do with the urban attitude in which others are largely left alone. At Campus View it also involves language difficulties. Using a foreign language can be a source of tension itself and therefore the use of language to reduce tension is not a good option.

For these reasons, the most common greeting is probably no greeting at all. Some interaction is necessary when the car is crowded, or when one occupant is close to the button panel, but this is largely related to personal space.

One of the things that my observations

suggest is that a potentially fruitful area for folklorists is the study of foreign language. All foreign language textbooks include some folklore to give a bit of the flavor of the culture. It seems reasonable that this aspect of language learning would benefit from some expertise from folklorists. The life of foreign students at a university would probably be a little easier with some sounder instruction in the ways of the culture into which they are moving.

The language problems at Campus View are complex because students need reading skills and writing skills, but do not require conversational skills. One of the poorest speakers I know is a Japanese man researching a dissertation on American Literature. As mentioned before, the wives often know little or no English. This problem of communication is compounded by cultural attitudes which regulate to whom women should speak or by whom they may be addressed.

It is unreasonable to expect people to adopt a different culture simply because they want to study at a university. Unfortunately, this means in effect that the least interaction is often the safest, and is certainly often the easiest. This seems to coincide with the urban tendency to interact with people as little as possible.

I do not wish to give the impression that everyone at Campus View goes sullenly about their business ignoring everyone else. People do meet and make friends, but they come with their cultures, attitudes, class prejudices, religions, and so on and that is what makes such things as greetings in Campus View interesting.